

**TESTIMONY BY SECRETARY GRANTLAND JOHNSON
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**FOR THE LITTLE HOOVER COMMISSION
HEARING ON FOSTER CARE
AUGUST 22, 2002**

- Thank you for inviting me to talk about California's child welfare system. As one of the State's most vulnerable populations, children who have been abused and neglected need and deserve our focused attention. Hearings like this allow us to take stock of our progress and what still needs to be done.
- I'd also like to thank the foster youth and parents who spoke this morning for sharing their inspiring stories.
- Today, I'd like to discuss 4 key areas:
 1. A Snapshot of the Child Welfare System Today
 2. Steps Taken Since the 1999 Report
 3. Improving Integration and Outcome-Based Results
 4. Challenges Ahead: Critical Components of Reform
- And then I'd like to hand it over to Dr. Sylvia Pizzini and Dr. Stephen Mayberg to discuss these issues in more detail.

1. A SNAPSHOT OF THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM TODAY

- Historically, in the child welfare world, the pendulum has swung between two extremes – safety and permanency. On the one hand, the system may err on the side of safety of the child, and laws and policies are put in place to quickly remove a child from a home. But then – perhaps in reaction to a tragic news story – the tide may shift, and suddenly, family preservation or reunification is emphasized.
- This longstanding tension in child welfare, coupled with categorical funding, and a lack of focus on outcomes has resulted in a system that is fragmented and, too often, doesn't work in the best interests of children and their families.
- The challenge before us is to strike a balance in the pendulum, and recognize that every child and family is unique. There's no one-size-fits-all approach, and we need to stay the course with a consistent message. And that message is that we, as a state, must prioritize safety, permanency and child and family well-being.
- With that context, let me paint a broad picture of the numbers, and what the child welfare system looks like today.

- In 2001, there were just over 97,000 children in foster care – an 8 percent decrease from 105,000 children in 1998.
- Part of this decline can be attributed to **Kin-GAP**, the new **the Kinship Guardian Assistance Payment program**. Since the program's inception in January 2000, approximately 6,700 children have been able to leave foster care and find permanent homes with relatives who now receive financial support.
- Since 1999, parents have adopted nearly 20,000 children from the foster care system. As an added benefit, our success has earned the state nearly \$18 million in Federal Adoptions Incentive funds, as well as an Adoption Excellence Award from the federal government.

2. STEPS TAKEN SINCE THE 1999 REPORT

- While these numbers show we're moving in the right direction, there's still much more work to be done. While I'll rely on Dr. Pizzini and Dr. Mayberg to go into more detail, let me take a moment to describe just a few of the efforts we've made since you released your report in 1999.
- In the area of **prevention**, we have
 - Dedicated \$12 million over three years under the **Answers Benefiting Children program** to provide services such as Family Resource Centers, home visiting, and parent education.
 - Established the **California Safe and Healthy Families, Family Support Home Visiting Program** – a model program for early intervention and assistance to pregnant parents and children up to 3 years old.
 - Worked with the Attorney General's Office and the State Proposition 10 Commission, on the **Safe from the Start Initiative**, assisting local communities across the state in developing violence prevention programs. Through this initiative we have raised awareness about the devastating physical, emotional, and intellectual impact of violence on children, helped communities to develop effective prevention and intervention programs to address violence, organized a statewide conference and ten regional forums, and provided ongoing technical assistance to local programs.
- To improve the **quality of care** children and their families receive, we have:
 - Placed 270 **public health nurses** in county welfare and probation offices statewide to improve access to and documentation of health care services.

- Established the **Ombudsman Office for Foster Care** to provide children in foster care and their families with a means to resolve issues related to care, placement and services.
- Created the **Foster Care Help Line for Foster Youth**, a toll-free help line that youth can access from anywhere in the State to get their questions answered or problems resolved.
- To ensure that foster children are placed in **permanent homes** in a timely manner, we have:
 - Increase adoptions by 22 percent, from 6,000 in 1999 to over 7,300 in 2001.
 - Implemented the **Kin-GAP program**, to provide financial assistance to relatives who offer a permanent home to a foster child. The average monthly caseload in this program is expected to grow from 9,600 in FY 2001-02 to over 12,000 in FY 2002-03 – a 25 percent increase.
 - Launched **California Kid Connection**, an online statewide adoption exchange registry to expand placement opportunities for children and families.
- To ensure that **youth aging out of care** receive the support they need, we have:
 - Established the **Supportive Transitional Emancipation Program (STEP)**: which continues primary support for foster youth while participating in a transitional living plan up to the age of 21.
 - Created the **Transitional Housing for Foster Youth Fund** to expand existing transitional housing services to include foster youth 16 to 18 years of age and young adults who are participating in STEP.
 - Expanded the **Independent Living Program** to provide services to former foster youth up to the age of 21.
- To address **social worker** shortages and their increasing workloads:
 - Dramatically increased funding for child welfare services – by nearly 29 percent, from \$822 million in 1999 to over \$1 billion in 2001.
 - Established five regional training centers to provide training to new and continuing child welfare workers.

3. IMPROVING INTEGRATION AND OUTCOME-BASED RESULTS

- While these are just a few examples of some strides we've made in recent years, we've also undertaken some overarching and more long-term initiatives toward systemwide changes.
- Under the direction of Director Rita Saenz, the Department of Social is now in its third and final year of an effort to redesign the entire child welfare system.
- While this may sound ambitious, DSS is creating a blueprint – a vision for a **seamless and integrated system** – from emergency response calls to finalizing adoptions or reuniting a family.
- Over the past couple of years, Dr. Pizzini – who'll give you the specifics of the redesign – has worked closely with over a hundred of the state's stakeholders to redesign the system in a deliberate, holistic way – stepping back from the media pressures or the budget concerns – and focusing on the real needs of our children.
- While we can't make such sweeping and large-scale reforms overnight, the redesign will become a guide for DSS – a map, if you will – to ensure that as we put policies in place, we will know if we're going in the right direction.
- This year, the Stakeholders Group is focusing on building in a performance measurement system that is based on **outcomes**.
- These efforts will build on two related outcomes projects.
 - First, at my recommendation, Governor Davis signed **AB 636**, authored by Assemblyman Darrell Steinberg. AB 636 directs my agency to develop outcomes-based reviews of county child welfare departments. This will ensure that every county is accountable for meeting established performance goals. Therefore, I'll be convening a work group this fall to design the new reviews to begin in 2004.
 - Likewise, in September, we will be undergoing a new federal review of our system – the **Children and Family Services Review**. This statewide review measures performance in 14 areas – 7 outcomes and 7 systemic factors. This will be an opportunity to critically assess our strengths, and more importantly, areas for improvement.

4. CHALLENGES AHEAD: CRITICAL COMPONENTS OF REFORM

- It's clear that the child welfare system is ripe for reform, and while we can't expect success overnight, we're on the right track.

- To be successful an overhaul of the system will have to include each of the following critical components:
 - Increased efforts in prevention and early intervention
 - Comprehensive, integrated services that focus both on strengthening families and keeping children safe
 - Outcomes-based accountability
 - Flexible funding
 - A well-trained case workforce
 - A community-based approach
- I'd like to take a moment to emphasize the last point – a community-based approach – because there could be a particular role for the Little Hoover Commission to take on here.
- Today, we face the challenge of translating the Stakeholders' vision into practice “on the ground” and rallying the many people that do the work and provide the services.
- An integral part of a redesign is community involvement – that is, whole communities must take on the responsibility for the safety and well-being of their children. To this end, the Commission could build on its existing efforts to raise public awareness and focus intensively on specific areas affecting abuse and neglected children – whether to increase community services or increase adoptions.
- Because of the degree of change that must take place in communities, and in public and private agencies, it will be important that our story is told along the way to keep the momentum going. We need to engage our communities – inform them about every 2 steps forward we make, and, every step backward. Too many times, efforts toward reform meet a wall of “why it can't be done.” The Commission can play an important role in following and reporting on the progress that is made.
- The true measurement of success will be when California's communities see and treat foster children as if they were their own. The day that we prevail in our mission will be the day that we monitor the health, education, well-being and overall success of foster children the same way that we do for our own children.
- Before I pass this on to Dr. Pizzini and Dr. Mayberg, I would like to close by saying that we are hopeful that the Commission's work will continue to generate interest and a broader commitment to our reform efforts.